



May 5, 2021

House Finance Committee

Testimony regarding the Budget of the RI Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

The Economic Progress Institute submits this testimony on behalf of The Workforce Alliance, an association of adult education and training providers, policy and advocate organizations and philanthropic entities committed to ensuring our state has a high quality, inclusive workforce development system that meets the needs of all workers.

Our testimony today focuses on the statutory responsibilities of the RI Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to administer the adult education system in our state.

The adult education system, overseen by RIDE, is comprised of 20 organizations that together serve several thousand Rhode Island adults each year. Pre-COVID annual enrollment ranged from 6,000 – 8,000. During the year of the pandemic, the network pivoted to remote learning and was able to continue to serve 5,000 learners. Parents of K-12 students are among the adults served by these programs. Many programs also provided assistance to parents who were helping their own children navigate the challenges of learning from home.

The system provides foundational skills necessary for adults to succeed in the workforce and life, including English language proficiency, literacy, numeracy and digital skills. It prepares students to take the High School Equivalency test and many programs are testing sites. Most programs combine skills training with foundational skills acquisition and connect graduates to jobs. Adults also transition from the adult education system to post-secondary education.

The adult education system is a vital part of the state's workforce development system – serving new arrivals to the state as well as Rhode Islanders who need to increase skills to get a better job or have not gained sufficient skills in the K-12 system to move on to career or college. There are 68,500 working age adults who lack a high school credential in Rhode Island and 31,200 adults who do not speak English well or at all.

We know that as the economy reopens there will be many changes to the types of jobs available and shifts in economic sectors. To both promote economic mobility for workers and provide businesses with the workforce they need, we must ensure that all Rhode Island adults have the foundational workforce skills provided by the adult education system. The system is vital to ameliorating the disparities in economic mobility based on race and ethnicity that existed pre-COVID and have been highlighted by the pandemic. More Latinx and Black Rhode Islanders worked in direct care positions that put them at risk, or lost jobs in retail and hospitality and may be in need of gaining the foundational skills, especially English language and digital literacy provided by the adult education system to enter new jobs.

The system must be strong in both funding and in administrative support from RIDE. The total budget is around \$9M, including \$3.5M from the Job Development Fund (JDF), \$2M in general revenue, \$2M from the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act and \$1 million from the TANF block grant. The funds from the JDF are used to leverage federal funds from through the SNAP Employment and Training Program. Additional state funds should be appropriated as necessary to end waiting lists for services.

It is also critical that this Committee review the administrative support provided to the system by RIDE. Up until 2019, the adult education division at RIDE included 3 full-time equivalents. At present there is only 1 full-time staff person and a plan to hire a half-time person. RIDE staff ensure provider accountability, financial oversight, integration with the Governor's Workforce Board initiatives, compliance with federal WIOA requirements, and other tasks necessary to ensure the network provides high quality services designed to meet the varied needs of working age Rhode Islanders who require foundational skills.

We appreciate the many challenges in the K-12 system, and the need for RIDE to have sustained focus on elementary and secondary education. The adult education system's support for skill development among parents helps to ensure children's success in K-12 and is a critical strategy for the state to ensure that all Rhode Islanders have the skills to participate in and support the state's economic recovery post-pandemic. The adult education system must have adequate funding and administrative support to adapt to changes brought by the pandemic and to carry out its critical responsibilities.
